OPINION

BY MUNA KHAN

Nothing to watch

I SAW *Sorry Baby*, a really good film about a sexual assault that wasn't the typical trauma story. Since it may soon release on HBO Max, which is available in Pakistan, I recommend you watch it; I promise I haven't given too much away. The incident occurs between a graduate student and her thesis adviser and is not shown which makes it far more powerful than the often gratuitous violent assaults depicted on screen. The film is about Agnes, played by Eva Victor who directs the film too, and the struggles she faces in three years following the assault. She is a professor at the same college where the incident occurred and the film depicts, what *Deadline* called, "Agnes' imperfect journey through the other side of trauma".

The student-professor relationship is often portrayed as one brimming with some romantic or sexual tension. That is hugely problematic because more often than not, the relationship stays within professional boundaries but cinema and TV love to show otherwise. I think it has to do with audiences enjoying stories about secrecy or something forbidden or the power imbalance that comes with illicit relationships.

There's a forbidden relationship in the popular TV show *Pretty Little Liars* between a high school girl and her English teacher. The way it is portrayed, audiences can't help but feel like they should be rooting for them even though they know it's wrong. In the real world, it's statutory rape in many countries, including the US where the show was created and targeted a demographic of girls as young as 11. Imagine them thinking that this relationship was 'cute' rather than being told this is wrong. It sends the message that intentions — they didn't mean to fall in love — are more important than being taken advantage of.

I am loath to generalise but the correct word for a teacher pursuing a student at school and undergraduate level is 'predator'. Universities have different guidelines about professor-student relationships at the graduate level but you can't deny the power imbalance there too. Sometimes it is complex but sometimes it is simple, ie, inappropriate. It's why I urge you to watch *Sorry Baby* to see how that relationship is portrayed and then how the story is told from the point of view of the survivor and not the predator.

It is against this backdrop that I wanted to write about *Main Manto Nahin Hoon*, a drama by the infamously problematic writer Khalilur Rehman Qamar who is known for his regressive and misogynist portrayals of (and comments about) women. Full disclosure: my father and I watched three episodes of this play when it aired but didn't get into it so we abandoned it but I have followed criticism on social media of the portrayal of a relationship between the professor Manto (Humayun Saeed) and his student Mehmal (Sajal Ali). In one scene, students boycott their class and demand their professor perform a court marriage with Mehmal. This happens in front of the dean whose response is to say "wow". And not launch an inquiry into this grossly inappropriate relationship. Social media users were right to call this scene absurd. In another nonsensical video clip of a scene I saw on X, students clap when the professor seems to accept the student's advances/proposal. Mehmal keeps calling him 'sir'. In the good news, social media users have been calling this out. I wish the same could be said for 'reviewers'.

A fortnight or so ago, actor Atiqa Odho discussed this play in a talk show saying that some universities were not going to allow TV crews to film on campuses because they were upset at the way the drama glamourised the teacher-student relationship. I understand there is a market for problematic storylines but in a country like ours, we have to draw a line, especially because misogynistic comments are defended, and men get away with abuse, rape, murder, etc. This is not the messaging we want our children to receive.

> The correct word for a teacher pursuing a student is 'predator'.

Imagine parents not wanting to send their daughters to universities because they don't see them as safe places. We cannot afford girls dropping out. A paper in the *Journal of Development and Social Sciences* found that women dropped out of a university in Karachi due to early marriage, insensitivity towards harassment and family pressure. While the rate of female enrolment has seen a slow increase, according to the market research company Gitnux, the gross enrolment ratio for tertiary education specifically for females is eight per cent. This is dismal.

Our dramas were known for sharp, incisive commentary on social issues, for shifting attitudes on outdated values. Now they're celebrating regression, misogyny and issues that have no standing in plural, progressive societies. Women shouldn't have to suffer so that media companies can make money. ■

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BY SAMEER KHOSA

The 27th amendment

THE cat is out of the bag. The government plans to pass another amendment to the Constitution. After days of secret negotiations, the draft of the proposed amendment was presented in the Senate on Saturday. Proposals include the establishment of a federal constitutional court. The retirement age of the FCC judges will be increased. Judges of high courts could be transferred against their will and stand retired if they refuse. The first chief justice of the FCC will be appointed by the president on the advice of the prime minister. Other proposals include changes in Article 243 abolishing the Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee, making the Chief of Army Staff the Chief of Defence Forces, and giving field marshals their rank and uniform for lifetime.

To discuss this amendment without its context would be to miss the forest for the trees. The context is this: parliament that stands to pass these amendments is the least representative parliament in Pakistan since the end of the Musharraf era in 2008.

The 2024 elections that resulted in the present government have been widely discredited by internal as well as external election observers — at least those that have dared to say so in public. Internal observers such as Pattan that exposed the rigging had their offices raided and sealed. External observers such as the Commonwealth sat on its report of November 2024 for almost a year until it was leaked. The EU has declined to release its *Election Expert Mission Report* for fear that it will damage foreign relations with Pakistan. That in itself explains how flattering that report must be.

An independent judiciary constitutes an existential threat to the sham political order created out of those elections. Thus, every attempt has been made to subjugate the judiciary. Independent election tribunals that were inquiring into the irregularities were sidelined by changing the law to allow handpicked retired judges to be appointed as tribunals. When the Supreme Court ruled that reserved seats for minorities and women must be allocated to the PTI, a constitutional amendment was passed to ensure that the author of that judgement would not become the next chief justice of Pakistan (CJP). Constitutional benches were created comprising judges in whose selection the government itself had a say. They conveniently undid the verdict and handed several extra seats to the ruling coalition, thus making an unrepresentative parliament even more unrepresentative.

Since the 26th Amendment, an onslaught of judicial manipulation has ensued, just as intended. Justice Yahya Afridi was appointed CJP out of turn while skipping the two senior-most judges of the Supreme Court. In the Judicial Commission of Pakistan, Justice Amin-ud-Din Khan (who was junior even to Justice Afridi) was appointed as the head of the constitutional bench (conveniently voting for himself as the tie-breaker vote). It must have pleased those who appointed Chief Justice Afridi when he promptly consented to parachuting judges from other high courts to the Islamabad High Court to block the appointment of an independent-minded judge as the chief justice of that court. Similarly, it must have been equally pleasing when the constitutional bench rubber-stamped such transfers.

Thus, through a mixture of incentives and coercion the regime has caused the judiciary to turn on itself. At critical moments, such as justice Qazi Faez Isa's apparent desperation for an extension causing him to overturn the 63A verdict, Justice Afridi's eagerness to accept the office of CJP at the cost of his colleagues, or Justice Amin-ud-Din's decision to vote for himself as the head of the constitutional bench, judges of the Supreme Court failed tests of character that could have protected the court and foiled these designs. Judges would do well to remember that Faustian bargains have tragic ends.

> The point of the amendment is to reward and control.

The point of the 27th amendment is to reward and control. To ensure that no judge considered unfriendly to the regime can survive and to reward others with extensions in tenure. This is why the FCC with the enhanced age, so that some judges can be allowed to retire while others can be taken to the new court. This is why the power to transfer, so that troublesome judges can be transferred out of the way. This is why the new FCC will be staffed by judges picked by the PM and his handpicked chief justice.

Let no one fool you about what is going on: a political elite ruling against the will of the people is destroying the institutions of this country and defacing its Constitution only to perpetuate their own unrepresentative rule. In the face of this assault, resistance is our duty. If there is a lawmaker with conscience left on the treasury benches, dare one say it, exercise it now. ■

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FROM THE PAST PAGES OF DAWN

1975 | Fifty years ago

Decision on Penal Code

LAHORE: A meeting of the Council of Islamic Ideology was held … here today [Nov 8] under the chairmanship of Mr Justice (retd) Hamoodur Rahman. The Council took decisions on 23 Acts of the Pakistan Code in connection with Islamisation of laws in the country. The question of enforcement of Islamic social order in Pakistan was discussed … and the following recommendations were adopted: 1. Government should take effective steps to enforce the laws prohibiting prostitution; 2. Corporal punishment should be introduced in the case of all anti-social offences and such punishment should be given in public; 3. Betting on horse-race should be prohibited. While continuing discussion on … Riba, it was decided that a questionnaire may be prepared. — News agencies

[Meanwhile, as reported by news agencies from Rawalpindi,] Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto has said that Allama Iqbal's message is of significance to us as a nation, to the Muslim world and the world... . In a message … on 98th birth anniversary of ... Iqbal, the [PM] said: "With his keen sense of the historical situation, Iqbal predicted the collapse of imperialism and the slow disintegration of capitalism in the world."

1950 | Seventy-five years ago

Unjust papers

KARACHI: "It would not be wrong to say that we just have no publicity here" — writes an important Pakistani from New York in a letter to *Dawn*. He continues: "I have been here now for about two months. B.N. Rao's speech at the opening session of the UN General Assembly was fully published; Zafrullah's was not. Not only that, it was not even mentioned in any daily paper that he spoke. []A fortnight ago Chaudhri Zafrullah Khan gave an interview in Canada on the Korean question fully supporting the US standpoint giving the green light to MacArthur. I read the interview for the first time in *Dawn* and before that, I had not even heard about it.

"A week ago, I read Mandal's interview in the *Hindustan Times* virtually admitting that he was only spying on our Cabinet. Not a word of it is anywhere in the papers here, although his resignation letter was featured with his picture, etc."

[Meanwhile, as reported by news agencies in London,] speaking for the Government ... Home Secretary James Chuter Ede, said that Britain by her economic policies and a bit of luck had now reached a position where Marshall Aid was no longer a requisite of her economy.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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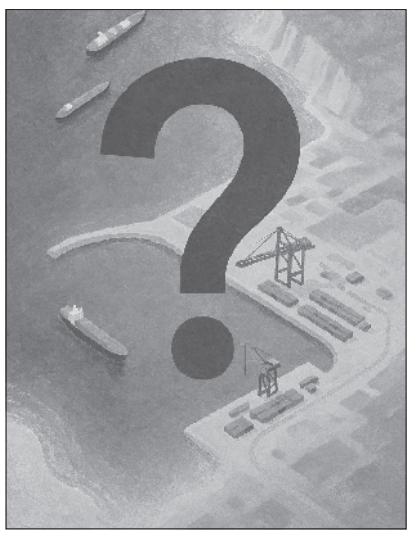
Letters may be edited for purposes of clarity and space. All letters should carry the writer's address, CNIC and phone numbers.



Geopolitics along Pakistan's coast

THIS is with reference to the article "Mystery of the 'port deal'" (Oct 8), which quoted a recent report by the *Financial Times* as reporting that some advisers to Pakistan's army chief discussed with American officials a proposal to develop a deep-sea port in the coastal city of Pasni in Balochistan. The article pointed out at the outset that 'senior security sources' have denied any concrete move in that direction.

In fact, some White House sources cited by the *Financial Times* also denied that any such proposal was discussed at the presidential level. However, as the said article argued, the subject, nevertheless, "has raised many questions". The port initiative, if at all it gets ahead, may provide the United States potential access to one of the most strategic locations in the region.

According to media reports, American investors under the proposed plan would be granted the right to build and operate the port at Pasni — located about 100 miles from the Iranian border and 70 miles east of Gwadar, where China has already developed a major deep-sea port under its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The proposed project is expected to serve as a hub for Pakistan's vast mineral resources, and to connect with the mineral-rich region of Reko Diq through a new railway line for the transport of copper, antimony and other rare earth elements (REEs).

The Pasni project is reportedly one among several initiatives Islamabad has floated to reset and strengthen relations with Washington. One adviser quoted in the report admitted that Pakistan had neglected its strategic relationship with the US over the last two decades, allowing India to fill the resulting vacuum.

The proposed Pasni project — estimated to cost around $1.2 billion, financed through federal funding and US developmental investments — is described as purely commercial, with no clause allowing any US military presence. However, the project's geopolitical weight cannot be ignored, especially given its proximity to both Iran and the Chinese-operated port at Gwadar.

In September, an American company signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with a Pakistani firm to enhance cooperation in mining and mineral processing — a sign that American interest in Pakistan's mineral sector is on the rise. While official narratives portray this as an economic opportunity, the implications are far-reaching. The initiative could alter the regional balance, introducing a new layer of US-China strategic competition along Pakistan's coastline.

It is, therefore, crucial for Islamabad to proceed with utmost caution, ensuring that national interests, sovereignty and regional stability are not compromised in pursuit of short-term economic gains.

Khaliq Baksh
Pasni

Merit ignored

THE selection board meeting held at the Quaid-i-Azam University (QAU) in Islamabad on Oct 31 for faculty positions in the Mathematics Department has laid bare a malaise that has long plagued the higher education system of Pakistan, that is the triumph of cronyism over competence.

Eyewitness accounts from the proceedings paint a damning picture. Candidates were ranked not by quality of research, teaching demos or research vision, but by their proximity to the reigning mafia at QAU.

Once, the QAU's Mathematics Department was home to giants like Hassan Azad, Saleem Asghar, Asghar Qadir, Qaisar Mushtaq and others. These scholars built the intellectual capital of Pakistan on the bedrock of merit. Today, the same corridors echo with whispers of the so-called research collaborations that are little more than money-laundering schemes comprising third-rate affiliations, ghost authorships, and fat cheques obtained in return. Statutory bodies, including departmental committees, deanships and selection boards, are now fiefdoms where independent voices are silenced and pliant proteges are elevated.

Even the statutory safeguard of external experts failed because the nominees arrived not to evaluate, but to rubber-stamp the pre-decided lists. Merit lists were manipulated, presentations curtailed, and genuine contenders sidelined. No one, it seems, paused to ask what this does to a university that once ranked among the finest in Asia.

Unfortunately, the rot is not confined to one department or one campus. It is systemic. When vice-chancellors serve for ages in multiple universities, when syndicates are packed with loyalists, and when the Higher Education Commission (HEC) looks the other way, mediocrity becomes institutionalised.

Pakistan just cannot build a knowledge economy based on nepotism. The remedy is straightforward. Empower truly independent search committees with transparent scoring rubrics, livestream selection board proceedings, ensure mandatory public disclosure of all research grants and co-authorships, and enforce term limits for administrative posts. Let an impartial jury re-examine the recent recommendations, and let the findings speak for themselves; loud and clear.

Name withheld on request
Islamabad

FBR accountability

THIS is with reference to the editorial 'Untaxed glamour' (Nov 5), which rightly pointed out that "no one … should be allowed to stay outside the reach of the law". While the move made by the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) against tax dodgers who flaunt their wealth on social media is commendable, what about those who do not use social media and do not pay appropriate taxes, like the shopkeepers in Peshawar's Karkhano Bazaar and other such markets in the big cities? I have heard some of them say that if any tax collector comes near them, he would be lucky to escape unhurt.

Then there are those who claim to derive their incomes from agriculture and, therefore, proudly say that they are exempted from payment of income tax, hiding behind the façade of a pittance that they pay as provincial agricultural tax.

Such pious men, like retailers and owners of huge and multiple properties, for example, regularly go to the holy land for pilgrimage, but do not register themselves with the tax authorities. They argue that tax rupees mostly enrich the tax collectors and those who rule the country. And, while we are still at it, why not investigate the lifestyle of FBR employees to catch those indulging in corruption?

Shakir Lakhani
Karachi

▶ **CHALLAN SURPIRSE:** The postman recently brought an envelope that carried an e-challan issued to some Abdul Ghafoor for having violated some traffic law. The only problem with the challan was that there was no one named Abdul Ghafoor living at the postal address. In fact, no one in my entire family, including those on the peripheries of the extended clan, carried that name. Before launching the scheme, the relevant authorities would have done well to inform the citizens what they are supposed to do in such cases. I, for one, have no idea what to do with the e-challan that I have received. Any suggestions in this regard would be more than welcome.
Faraz Naseem
Karachi

▶ **PROPOSED AMENDMENT:** The proposed 27th Constitutional Amendment has sparked controversy in the country. While the government argues that the amendment is necessary to ensure the independence and impartiality of the judiciary, critics argue that it is an attempt to consolidate power and undermine the rule of law. The opposition parties have vowed to resist the amendment, citing concerns about the potential for politicisation of the judiciary and erosion of democratic institutions. The debate highlights the ongoing struggle for power and influence in the country.
Abdul Qadeer Jasra
Islamabad

▶ **STABILISATION FORCE:** The recent American proposal to establish an International Stabilisation Force (ISF) for Gaza marks a significant shift from traditional United Nations peacekeeping models towards an enforcement-oriented approach. While the concept may offer a path to contain violence in the war-torn enclave, it raises legitimate concerns about neutrality of external control. To achieve meaningful results, the initiative must be grounded in international consensus, ensuring balanced participation from regional and Muslim-majority states alike. Only through this can the initiative transform from a mere power exercise into a genuine mechanism of peace and reconstruction.
Muhammad Faizan Khalid
Lahore

Mamdani's victory has implications beyond America

THIS is with reference to the report 'Zohran Mamdani wins over NYC amid Democrat sweep' (Nov 6). Mamdani's victory in the mayoral election for New York City (NYC) marks a significant moment in American political history. Securing over a million votes, his victory comes at a time when a right-wing wave has largely captured the political space across the United States. Mamdani has become the first Muslim as well as the first South Asian to be elected NYC mayor. Being a socialist, his triumph in a city that is considered the financial hub of the US is both surprising and symbolic.

At just 34, Mamdani dared to challenge the forces of status quo and achieved what once seemed impossible. His victory has inspired millions of young people across the world who feel politically silenced under dictatorial regimes. This is not an isolated event. A growing political awakening among Gen-Z in South Asia has already led to the downfall of several totalitarian regimes. The examples of Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka stand as clear evidence of this generational shift. However, to ignore the geopolitical dimensions driving these developments would be nothing short of intellectual dishonesty.

The words of Abraham Lincoln — the ballot is stronger than the bullet — perfectly capture the spirit of these times. This wave of democratic resurgence poses a challenge to the so-called Big Brothers of the world. The time seems to have run out for those who believe they can suppress ideas with brute force. History, however, teaches us that when an idea is ripe and mature enough to capture the imagination of the masses, no power can stop it. Suppression fuels resistance, and when the ballot is denied, the youth are left with the proverbial Hobson's choice.

Abdullah Ali
Karachi

External Ombudsman

Veteran journalist Muhammad Ali Siddiqi is *Dawn's* External Ombudsman (DEO). His duty is to attend to our readers' complaints, and to respond to them professionally. DEO is the investigating authority to whom all complaints can be referred, and it is DEO who takes notice of any alleged violations of *Dawn's* code of ethics, and informs the Editor for appropriate action.
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